

THE PROBLEM OF NOMINATIVE-ERGATIVE TRANSITIONS

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Summary: The paper addresses a repeatedly discussed question in alignment system typology, namely whether there are processes that turn full-fledged nominative constructions into ergative or *vice versa*. On the basis of his historical-typological theory of sentence pattern evolution, schematogony, the author strives for a deeper understanding of the historical relations between the two alignment patterns, taking the tripartite and active alignments into consideration as well. He arrives at a conclusion that an indirect shift from ergative to nominative is nearly excluded, while the opposite is only possible in cases of the initial construction's predicate being a participle rather than a finite verb. Indeed, it is the (proto)active pattern that can be shown to be the common predecessor of both nominative and ergative constructions (yielding their indirect relationship) and, although the ergative pattern is more conservative, the two construction types addressed emerged independently of each other.

One of the questions that have continuously been discussed in connection with alignment systems or sentence patterns typology is whether there are processes that turn full-fledged nominative constructions into ergative or *vice versa*. It goes without saying that this question could be raised in relation to any two syntactic types, but discussion relating to these two particular patterns predominate in the literature by a wide margin. It is quite clear that if the possibility of such transitions is supported by evidence, and especially if there is no other conceivable hypothesis for the emergence of the nominative and the ergative patterns than that of deriving them from each other (in whichever direction), then any theory aiming at finding standard tendencies in sentence pattern development runs the risk of being discredited.

In what follows, I shall argue for a conception of historical relations of sentence patterns that renders the probability for clear-cut nominative and ergative constructions to undergo such a transition marginal and heads out for an understanding of the nominative-ergative relation on a wider basis of a theory of sentence pattern evolution that I call schematogony.¹

Historical change of case or function alignment systems could be considered a «pseudonym» for historical change of sentence type so that consequently we may say, historical change of the type of the language itself. Indeed, on the grounds of the proceedings of the last half century, we can take it for common wisdom that Pre-Indo-European, the inferable ancestor of Proto-Indo-European, was an active type language,² whereas there is no doubt for the latter to have already been nominative in syntactic typological terms. Therefore, be-

¹ The name stands for 'the birth of (sentence) patterns'.

² See [Klimov 1977; Gamkrelidze, Ivanov 1984; Lehmann 2002] as milestones on the road towards this conclusion.

tween the two historical levels, there has certainly taken place a shift relating to the alignment (and therefore syntactic) system, that in this case has led to a shift in the type of the language as such. Nevertheless, while not impossible, it is obviously also not inevitable for an alignment pattern change to trigger a holistic change *per se* in a given language. Alignment patterns can coexist in a language with only one of them determining the syntactic type of that language or even leaving it to be of a mixed type. That is why diachronic typology is mostly concerned with the history of types of linguistic categories, structural principles and processes rather than with the history of language types as wholes in the first place. In turn, the coexistence of several patterns does not necessitate revising the basic thesis of any serious attempt to develop a historical typology, namely that typological shifts that can take place in languages or their subsystems are not merely random changes. It is not the case that anything can change into anything else, by far. To put it in other words, typological changes are subject to an evolutionary logic of some kind.

Constrained by the scope of the present topic, I am going to present only what my schematogenic theory suggests for the four basic alignment types in this respect.

Consider the outline of the basic alignment model that allows us to grasp the essence of alignment systems in formulas. The symbols I will use, namely «S», «A» and «P» for the compulsory complements of intransitive and transitive verbs, respectively, are commonly widespread in typological work.³ This is what we can call a transitivity chart:

S	intransitive verb	
A	transitive verb	P

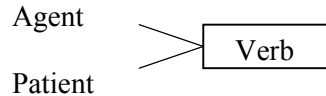
The chart depicts one-argument intransitive and two-argument transitive verbs, leaving out of consideration null-argument intransitive and three-argument transitive (i.e. ditransitive) verbs. A *Subject, Verb, Object* basic word order is presupposed.

Given the chart, we can formulate three of the four alignment types overwhelmingly represented cross-linguistically, i.e. nominative, triadic (tripartite) and ergative ones, as follows:

- S ≠ A ≠ P – triadic (or tripartite) alignment,
- S = A (but ≠ P) – nominative alignment,
- S = P (but ≠ A) – ergative alignment.

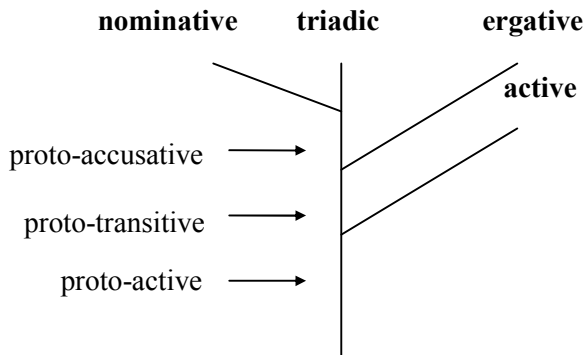
³ Let me note that one should avoid understanding these symbols led by their etymology (subject, agent, patient) which is quite misleading. In other papers of mine, I preferred to use the Roman numbers instead of S, A, P (I, II and III, respectively). See [Havas 2006: 2008].

The fourth alignment type, namely the one that is called active or agentive falls outside the chart, since transitivity as an organic principle simply does not operate in this pattern. The alignment here depends rather on whether a given argument of any verb – and not only intransitive ones, as it was presumed earlier (a point we have to return to further on) – represents an agent or a non-agent entity or an active *vs.* stative opposition, if seen from the point of view of the verbal predicate. Thus, with active pattern we arrive at a semi-semantic, rather than a merely syntactic, model:



Even from a purely descriptive point of view, these four alignment types do not differ from each other equally but can be grouped on the basis of their similarities and dissimilarities. The most closely related two patterns are the nominative and the triadic in that the use of the accusative case – that is the one dedicated to, and only to, function P – is common and at the same time restricted to both (while the subject, marked or handled in a nominative sense, i.e. $S = A$, only appears in the former). These two alignment types can be collectively called accusative, in contrast to the tradition that treats this term as a synonym for the nominative type. The alignment type closest to these two is the ergative, in that it is only in these three types that sentence patterns are primarily determined by transitivity relations, and can consequently be referred to as transitive types. As stated earlier, the alignment pattern in active languages is based on a non-transitive principle.

The basic statement of the schematogenic theory is that these synchronic patterns stand in systematic diachronic relation, which allows us to establish a model of their historical-typological evolution. The chart below represents a hypothetical diachronic relation of the four basic alignment patterns.⁴ The «proto»-marked stretches indicate the periods of the new underlying alignment principle's emergence.



⁴ Note that, though, at least theoretically, it could be done, we do not follow the «evolution tree» further down than necessary for our present purposes.

Let us begin our explanation of the tree at its top. The nominative and the triadic patterns are, as was said earlier, connected by the presence of the accusative and it is this feature that sets them in contrast – primarily – to the ergative pattern. For diachrony this implies that the emergence of the accusative (the direct object) is independent of that of the nominative and in all likelihood pre-dates it. It suggests that the «common ancestor» of the nominative and the triadic patterns may have involved the accusative, but not the nominative, case. (Thus, the present triadic pattern is closer in structure to this «common ancestor» than its nominative counterpart.) Given that function P had already been differentiated, i.e. the category of the direct object had emerged in this early pattern, there was no obstacle to the merger of functions S and A, that is, to the emergence of the nominative case.

A comparison of the triadic and the nominative patterns in itself proves the statement that the grammatical object is a more archaic category than the grammatical subject. There is further empirical evidence that supports this, here exemplified with a construction typical of Russian. In this language, for instance, a sentence meaning ‘the wave carried away the boat’ can be construed in three ways:

<i>Volna</i> wave-NOM(FEM)	<i>unesla</i> carried(FEM)	<i>lodku.</i> boat-ACC	
<i>Lodka</i> boat-NOM(FEM)	<i>(byla)</i> (was FEM)	<i>unesena</i> carry-PSSPART(FEM)	<i>volnoj.</i> wave-INST
<i>Volnoj</i> wave-INST	<i>uneslo</i> carried(NEUTR)	<i>lodku.</i> boat-ACC	

The first variant has a nominative active⁵ structure: ‘the wave carried away the boat’, the second one is a nominative passive: ‘the boat was carried away by the wave’. The third construction, however, is neither active, nor passive. Its agent appears in an oblique case, like in the second, passive variant; nevertheless its patient is in the accusative, like in the first, nominative active structure. Of course, this does not mean that this pattern could be conceived of as a contamination of the first two ones, the more that as a contrast to them there is no agreement of the verb in it with either of its arguments. Thus, this is another autonomous structure of a transitive verb with its two core arguments. I call this specific pattern a semi-accusative one. There is no possibility for me here and now to discuss and point out the inadequacy of the several kinds of flawed hypotheses that sought to explain the emergence of this structure from a nominative one. In my mind, this syntactic formation is rather the relic of an archaic sentence pattern whose structural principle did not involve the presence of a subject whereas it obviously involved the presence of an object.⁶

⁵ Active is to be understood here as a counterpart of passive rather than the denomination of the active type.

⁶ For further analysis of this construction see [Zaretsky 2009: 32 ff].

Turning back to the chart, we must recall that transitivity was present in the accusative as well as the ergative patterns as a principle of syntactic construction. This implies that the emergence of syntactically relevant transitivity predates all the three patterns discussed so far, whereas it certainly postdates the separation of the active pattern, in which it is unheard of. I call this inferable period of the appearance of syntactic transitivity the *proto-transitive* one and assume for its existence to last until the bifurcation of it onto «proto-accusative» (the «common ancestor» of the two accusative patterns) and the «proto-ergative» took place. This time, it is the ergative alignment with its oblique A function that seems to be the closest to that common origin of the three transitive patterns. Active pattern, in turn, is the heir of a more ancient evolutionary level, which lacked even transitivity as a shaping principle. The system of transitivity actually replaced the earlier active *vs.* stative opposition, in this way replacing the semantically based constructional principles with syntactically based ones.

Having said much about sentence pattern evolution in general, we can concentrate our attention on our proper topic, the question of nominative-ergative transitions. First of all it must be clear that the question is not whether nominative and ergative features can be present simultaneously in any given language (naturally they can, actually some authorities claim that purely nominative or ergative languages simply do not exist).⁷ If the two patterns in a given language work so symmetrically that one can speak of split ergativity⁸ or even of mixed type, there is no particular reason to ponder the mechanisms of the transition from either type to the other. In a system like this, either pattern can simply replace the other analogically, and a mixed or split type language can thus turn into a purely ergative or nominative language. This is obviously not the same as the issue of the transition between the ergative and the nominative types and the linguists who think such transitions are possible did not have these cases in mind but rather changes of the patterns themselves whether in the nominative → ergative or the ergative → nominative direction.

Those who try to derive the ergative from the nominative pattern do not normally start from the nominative active construction, but there are exceptions. The hypothetical possibility of such a transition is suggested in [Dixon 1980]. Let us begin with a nominative language with the basic word order VSO, in which the nominative is always suffixed with *-s*, the accusative with *-n*. In such a language an intransitive sentence is of the form VS-*s*, a transitive sentence of the form VS-*s*O-*n*. If all sentence-final consonants are lost through phonological change, the following sequences result: VS and VS-*s*O, that is, the subject of

⁷ Bear in mind that when a language is assigned to one of the types described above this simply means that one of the syntactic patterns is dominant (rather than exclusive) in it. Furthermore, syntactic processes reminiscent of the mechanisms of some other type are even found in languages that appear to be purely nominative or purely ergative [Moravcsik 1978].

⁸ Split ergativity refers to a pattern in which a language that is basically ergative morphologically and (at least partially) ergative syntactically nevertheless shows nominative constructions or processes under certain circumstances.

intransitive sentences as well as the object of transitive sentences will be unmarked, but the subject of transitive sentences remains marked. Thus an ergative system has arisen. While this explanation is admittedly elegant, it is not grounded in reality. First of all, it is questionable whether there are sound changes that affect sounds in sentence-final rather than word-final position. But even if the answer is in the affirmative, no one has ever demonstrated an actual instance of such a change, which is all the more understandable in view of the fact that the basic word order VSO is hardly ever found in ergative languages.

The majority of the nominative → ergative explanations derive the ergative construction from a reanalysis of earlier passive constructions (in particular from the reanalysis of the oblique agent of the earlier passive sentence). Thus, for instance, some analyses assume that the instrumental that accompanied passive participles was reanalysed in Middle Indic as ergative in the third person singular – where these participles could occur without a copula – when in other finite sentences the original Indo-European person markers were lost and thus the difference between active vs. passive sentences was obscured. Since these sentences described acquired properties, they simultaneously assumed a perfective semantics. Similar reanalysis can take place in possessive constructions. This is because in languages that lack a possessive verb of the ‘have’ type the possessor was expressed with one of the oblique cases in sentences that state that a relation of possession holds (i.e. in habitive sentences), e.g. ‘to the boy seen picture is’, and this could also be reanalysed as a perfective construction.⁹ Thus two different kinds of periphrastic constructions can possibly give rise to the new perfective, the passive and the intransitive habitive. What is common to them is that the topic – the agent of the transitive verb, and the possessor, respectively – is in some oblique case, while the nouns in functions S and P are unmarked. Thus if the passive meaning of the participle is obscured, the ergative system $S = P \neq A$ emerges.¹⁰ This argument too, unfortunately involves a couple of assumptions that are sometimes obscure and need further corroboration. For instance, why did participles not need to be accompanied by the copula in the third person singular? How could the oblique possessor of intransitive habitive sentences be treated in the same way as the agent of transitive verbs? Given that it is impossible to assume that the typical sentences including transitive verbs were originally not those with nominative agents, i.e. active sentences, why and how did original active nominative sentences disappear from these languages so that the typical transitive sentence could be that with a passive construction? Is it self-explanatory that the disappearance of verbal person marking is a prerequisite to the emergence of ergative constructions the way assumed here, in which case one has to explain how person marking then (re)emerged in ergative languages that have it? And the list could be conti-

⁹ Much like with have-constructions in languages that possess it: *the boy has seen a picture* originally meant ‘the boy has a picture that is seen’. This evolution of perfect is widely proven by those languages using the perfect construction with the cognates of *have* with transitive verbs only, thus corroborating the view that originally, the participle was the attribute of the possessed object rather than part of the verbal predicate.

¹⁰ On this see [Anderson 1977: 332-336].

nued.¹¹ Nevertheless, typologists concerned with this question believe to have proved with respect to a number of ergative languages (Indo-Aryan, Australian and Polynesian) that the emergence of ergativity in them was preceded by the generalisation to exclusive status of their originally nominative passive sentences.¹²

However, in an important paper [Trask 1979] pointed out already that the generalisation of passive and its reanalysis to an ergative construction can be applied (let us add: at best) only to a particular type of ergative languages, and it happens to be the type in which the ergative construction is used in all tenses and aspects. But this undermines the argument based on participles because unless we assume that a language applied participles instead of finite verbs in all tenses and aspects (and without a copula),¹³ there must have been finite verb forms in the initial stage of the change. In the presence of finite verbs also it is the disappearance of passive person marking that would be presupposed by such a reanalysis, a claim that needs to be supported by robust evidence, and it verges on the incredible that it could have happened so consistently – in every single ergative language of this type.

More recently a competing theory has appeared that presents an alternative to the passive → ergative derivation. [Bynon 2005] suggests that the marked agent in the ergative constructions of Indic and Iranian languages derives historically from a formation in which the present agent used to be in the function of an adnominal possessor next to a participle in the nominal function. The construction in question originally appeared only with non-agentive intransitive verbs, and it only extended to transitive verbs later. It used to have a modal meaning (*viz* expressing spontaneous events) and the only way for it to extend for transitive constructions expressing intentional activities was through verbs that were open to both medial and active interpretations (like English *break*). This development made syntactic reanalysis possible in that the noun marked for genitive came to be interpreted as the subject of a transitive sentence (i.e. the genitive no longer marked the possessor but assumed the ergative function). Syntactic disambiguation was achieved when the genitive case was subsequently replaced by the instrumental (but this had nothing to do with the passive construction either). While Bynon's hypothesis is also not necessarily watertight, its advantage over the passive theory is that it gives an obvious answer to the question why the agent is in the sentence-initial position (which the passive theory has a hard time explaining) in that as an original possessor the noun later

¹¹ Let us also note that nominative passive sentences are used instead of their active counterparts precisely when the topic of the sentence is the patient rather than the agent. The reanalysis of the latter as subject would require the prior reversal of this process, i.e. the (re)topicalisation of the passive agent.

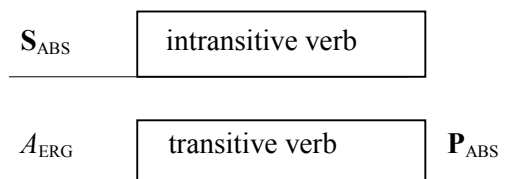
¹² This line of argumentation would also explain why passive constructions are so rare in ergative languages (where it exists, as in Basque or Georgian, it seems to be an innovation), or why function P is unmarked in most ergative languages (because, so the argument goes, this was the original subject in the passive construction).

¹³ This is not an absurd claim, but if it is presupposed in an argument it should be made more explicit.

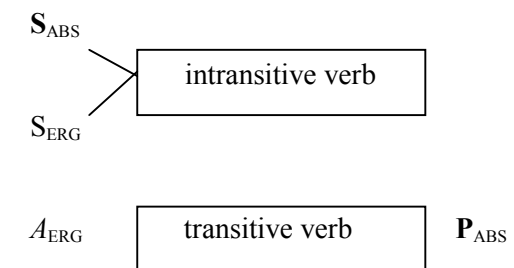
reanalysed as agent could naturally be in initial position already at the earliest stage.

Note, however, that both of these – incompatible – hypotheses about the nominative → ergative transition have an important point in common: they both assume the reinterpretation specifically of nominative constructions involving *participles* into ergative constructions, and thus they cannot be extended to the emergence of prototypical ergative constructions, i.e. those involving *non-participial predicates* even if either of them proves to be correct for Indic and Iranian.

The opposite hypothesis that nominative constructions derive from their ergative counterparts has also been frequently entertained. An often encountered methodological problem with these explanations is that they make no distinction between the description of a typological configuration and the hypothesis concerning its emergence, but simply assume that the state itself to be accounted for is enough to justify it. An example will make this clearer. In some ergative languages the ergative case is used in the function S (in addition to the function A) when a given intransitive verb expresses intentional activity. In other words, instead of the classic ergative pattern (abs = absolutive, erg = ergative):



we see this:



where S_{ABS} stands for the inactive subject of intransitive verbs meaning event, state, existence, that is, for the intransitive *patient*, whereas S_{ERG} stands for the active subject of intransitive verbs expressing intentional activity, that is, for the intransitive *agent*. These are the facts – and here comes the interpretation. What we see here is supposedly the extension of ergative to intransitive verbs, more precisely the first phase of this process, when it only affects active intransitive subjects. The next step is for ergative to be extended to inactive subjects too, with the result that the subject of intransitive verbs is marked in the same way as that of transitive verbs, i.e. $S = A$, which means that the full-fledged nominative is born. Thus the stage represented in the second chart above is nothing else

but a transition from the ergative to the nominative pattern. Historically, then, nominative case is nothing else but ergative extended (to function S), while accusative case is correspondingly nothing else but absolutive restricted (to function P).¹⁴

This interpretation is untenable on several counts. First, from the perspective of its outcome: assuming that the absolutive case was unmarked (as it is in the most ergative languages), the nominative pattern coming about in this way would have involved a marked nominative and an unmarked accusative. Now, one of the basic tenets of diachronic typology is uniformitarianism, which says that the languages of the world showed the same typological constellations in past as they do now (and they excluded those they exclude now), and consequently we cannot assume stages in explanations of diachronic changes that are not currently found in any known language. I am inclined to claim that no nominative language has been convincingly demonstrated to have marked nominative and unmarked accusative.¹⁵ But even if languages like this were encountered, their numbers would be so small that it would take more than ordinary courage to hypothesise an unattestable stage like that in the past of nominative languages. There are further pitfalls down the road. It is an erroneous assumption that ergative is always synonymous with *active* transitive subject,¹⁶ and hence it is not at all self-explanatory why it would have been extended (only) to active intransitive subjects when it was generalised. The most problematic aspect, however, is the motivation of the change. How is it possible for

¹⁴ See e.g. [Plank 1985: 272 ff, 1995: 1187 ff]. Note that the stage represented in the second chart is exactly the same as the usual – and erroneous – representation of the active alignment (*viz* that agent and patient are only distinguished for intransitive subjects). From this perspective, the process leads from the ergative to the nominative through the active pattern (of course, only under this misinterpretation of the active principle).

¹⁵ Six or a little more nominative languages are mentioned in the literature that have a marked subject and an unmarked object. This is a point that requires further investigation. In some of these languages, what is believed to be (marked) nominative is in fact something else. This is the case e.g. in Oromo, where the isolated («citation») form and the predicative form are supposedly the accusative (for instance, with a word like ‘house’ this would be found as a caption to a picture or in the sentence ‘this is a house’), which implies that the use of the accusative is also not the same as is usual in typical nominative languages. In other languages, e.g. Aymara, what is called unmarked accusative is in fact a truncated stem form that differs from the stem of what is believed to be the nominative, which raises the question whether this is some kind of internal inflexion – perhaps deriving from an earlier ending – i.e. the accusative is still marked in its own way. In yet other languages one has the suspicion that the alleged marker of the nominative is in fact a topic-marker. It should also be seen clearly whether the putative nominative ending occurs with non-agent subjects too; if not, the ending does not mark the subject as such, i.e. it is not a nominative marker. Given all these, I think claims that there are nominative languages with marked nominative case and unmarked accusative case (in the classical sense of these two case forms) are to be taken with a pinch of salt at best.

¹⁶ In a clear-cut ergative language, in sentences like *the shooter killed the wolf* and *the bullet killed the wolf* the subjects *shooter* and *bullet* would equally shape as ergative.

the ergative case to extend to anything that is not in function A in a language in which it is the only marker of transitivity (given that the absolutive – even if it is marked – is not confined to positions associated with transitive verbs)? Furthermore, how is one to envisage the shift from ergativity to nominativity (from one transitive pattern to another) in such a way that the principle of transitivity is lost half way through and a purely syntactic kind of pattern turns into a half-syntactic, half-semantic pattern only to return to a purely syntactically based pattern again in the next step?¹⁷

The theory of schematogony says that the stage illustrated above in the second chart is actually an ergative stage in which the environment of intransitive verbs preserves relics of a past (proto-)active pattern. Thus the novelty is not in the bifurcation of intransitive subjects but in the non-bifurcation of transitive ones.¹⁸ The expected next stage with respect to intransitive agents is not their extension to intransitive patients but, on the contrary – since this case form originally expressing the agent is more and more bound to appear with transitive verbs –, their disappearance from the environment of intransitive verbs, in other words, the generalisation of intransitive patients to all intransitive verbs.

¹⁷ In fairness to Plank, he mentions another possible explanation in the same work. The point is that a reverse process is also conceivable in which the «irregular» ergative configuration discussed above can be interpreted as a phase in the transition from the active to the ergative pattern. Plank does not go into details about this – understandably in view of the fact that he is discussing the emergence of the nominative pattern. Of course it is not the case that our second chart above represents the active pattern (bear in mind that in active languages the subject of transitive verbs bifurcates in the same way as that of intransitive verbs), and, consequently, in a putative active → ergative change it is incumbent on us to explain the appearance of transitivity as a syntactic principle. Yet, despite its problematic status, the active → ergative hypothesis is still closer to what probably happened than the ergative → nominative hypothesis.

¹⁸ The transitive construction based on the agentive/ ergative must have resulted from analogical changes. While there is an equal likelihood of intransitive subjects being agents or non-agents (*the boy is running* vs. *the boy is dying*) in any of the world's languages, the subjects of transitive verbs are overwhelmingly agents (although it is important from another aspect that not all of them are) and, not unrelated to this, their patients are overwhelmingly not subjects. Consequently in a (proto-)active language the original agent marking next to transitive verbs describing the intentional causation of impact could be generalised to the marking of transitive «subject» in general – the ancestor of agentive (= A in triadic languages)/ ergative – sooner and more easily than the marking of intransitive agents to intransitive subject in general. The fact is that the transitive construction involving a marked subject (and a mostly unmarked «object») only comes into being originally from the extension of an agent-verb-patient pattern meaning intentional activities to all transitive sentences (through the disappearance of the distinct forms of transitive patient «subjects») regardless of what happens (or more precisely does not happen) simultaneously to intransitive constructions. Then, if we see a case alignment like that in the second chart above in an ergative language, we can assume that the syntactic pattern of that language is not *yet* (and not *no longer*) purely ergative, and what distinguishes it from «classic» ergativity – i.e. the bifurcation of intransitive subjects (to disappear later) – is a (proto-)active relic in it.

This is how ultimately the absolutive case (S = P) and, with it, pure ergativity emerges.

Those typologists who assume that both the nominative → ergative and the ergative → nominative transitions are possible, naturally do not think of some pendular movement; what they mean is simply that both kinds of changes are attested in the history of the world's languages, actually, perhaps a change from any pattern to any other pattern is possible.¹⁹ Some claim that certain pattern changes are attested while others only possible and attempt to formulate principles in order to grasp the regularities governing possible vs. impossible diachronic shifts (but the lack of differentiation between facts and interpretations remains a problem in these approaches as well).²⁰ One of the most distinctive hypotheses is that of [Estival, Myhill 1988], who actually claim that the nominative-ergative shifts are cyclical. I shall not list the five major (and within those the numerous minor) steps their derivation consists of, let us confine ourselves to the most crucial turning point in the process they conjecture. This is that passive, secondary, intransitive constructions are reanalysed as active, primary, transitive constructions through reinterpreting what is in subject function in the passive construction as object and the oblique agent in the passive construction as subject while the passive morphology is lost (this is how we arrive from the passive nominative to the ergative construction). Then as this new subject acquires all the subject-like morphological properties, including the agreement of the verb with it, the nominative pattern appears. And since the nominative pattern is compatible with passive sentences, the latter may lead to a new start for the same process.²¹ While these linguists also try to lend credibility to their hypotheses with the help of linguistic data, at the end of the day our impression is that this whole edifice reflects the intellectual creativity of its progenitors, i.e. the way they conceive of these changes step by step to a greater extent rather than as those changes unfold in real language history.

My opinion can be summarised as follows. The nominative, the triadic and the ergative patterns are all descendants of the proto-active pattern, thus there is no obstacle in principle to any language of a mixed type to have included several of these patterns *throughout its history*. In a mixed language like that one of the patterns may become predominant through analogical changes, which may obviously change the type of the language, however, this is not a case of the replacement of a syntactic type by another but the marginalising of one pattern by another. As for the transition from one pattern to another we may say the following. (1) No language that is already transitive can lose this structural principle, thus neither the nominative, nor the ergative, nor the triadic pattern can turn into active even temporarily. (2) The ergative pattern cannot become

¹⁹ This is roughly true of [Plank 1995], where there are six initial patterns, and almost any pattern change is attested by examples – more precisely examples that are interpreted in a way that incidentally fits the interpretation the author is advocating.

²⁰ Cf., for instance, [Harris 1990; Harris, Campbell 1995: 240-281].

²¹ [Estival Myhill 1988: 466-468; Askedal 2001: 1636] present this conception as the syntactic parallel to the isolating–agglutinating–inflecting–isolating cycle of morphological typology.

nominative. (All the changes that have been interpreted in this way started in fact from a triadic or a protoactive pattern which was erroneously interpreted as ergative.)²² (3) It is perhaps possible for the nominative pattern to be reanalysed as ergative, starting from certain passive or adnominal possessive constructions. But in both cases it is a necessary precondition that the core of the original nominative sentence is a participle – whether in this or that role. (But even in these cases we maintain the viability of the explanation that these constructions emerged just like ergativity in general: from a stage that reflects the (proto-)active pattern,²³ and it is therefore unnecessary to assume some intermediate nominative stage.)²⁴ (4) This implies that we should exclude the possibility of the emergence of ergative constructions from nominative constructions including finite verbs.

It is also clear that even if it is (were) possible to demonstrate transitions in certain languages from the nominative to the ergative pattern or *vice versa*, we could not derive all instances of ergative and nominative patterns from each other, which would be circular anyhow. Nominative and ergative constructions originally emerged independently of each other (and the nominative constructions in several steps, because the accusative had to appear earlier so that later the nominative could also appear), and although the ergative constructions are more conservative (in their structural principles they are closer to the protoactive past), they are not themselves diachronic typological predecessors of the nominative constructions (see the evolution tree above). I am convinced that a representation of syntactic patterns which is based on the same principles diachronically as well as synchronically, and which is at least potentially revealing, is provided by the theory of schematogony.

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²² Here belong, I think, those hypotheses that derive the nominative constructions from the antipassive constructions of ergative languages (e.g. [Dixon 1979: 100]). In a sense this is the mirror image of the nominative passive → ergative hypothesis and is laden with much the same difficulties (for instance, it must assume the disappearance of antipassive morphology just like the other hypothesis must assume – in the case of languages with finite verbs – the disappearance of passive morphology).

²³ Recall that Pre-Indo-European (which preceded Proto-Indo-European) has been demonstrated a (proto-)active language. See footnote 2.

²⁴ For the derivation of perfectivity and of the past tense from a (proto-)active starting point via the shift from an aspect-based system to a tense-based system (in Indo-European) see [Gamkrelidze, Ivanov 1984: 300 ff].

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